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Virginia Woolf and Literary Impressionism

Virginia Woolf, born Virginia Stephen in 1882, is one of the most widely read authors of the Modernist movement in England. Her innovations in narrative form revolutionized fiction in the early 20th century, and the effects of her efforts are still being felt today. By exploring impressionistic methods in her novels, Woolf brought into being a new world of fiction. Her novels comprise a part of a larger movement in early twentieth century literature known as Modernism which was, Daniel Schwarz says, “a response to cultural crisis” (3). In an age following close on the heels of Nietzsche, Darwin, and Marx, the modernists sought “to find an aesthetic order or historic pattern to substitute for the crumbling certainties of the past” (4). A parallel movement occurred in the art world with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. What they sought was a new way of seeing—more personal, more expressive. In philosophy, as well, new ways of perceiving reality were being theorized. Henri Bergson’s concept of time had a significant impact on both writers and painters. “Modernism,” says Schwarz, “stressed that we lack a coherent identity and sought techniques to express this idea” (9). Bergson asks “What are we in fact, what is our character, if not the condensation of the history we have lived from our birth?” (9). Woolf explored these Modernist concerns through her own impressionistic techniques in order to get to what really mattered. Woolf’s sister, Vanessa Bell, was an artist who was most certainly influenced by the Impressionists, and Clive Bell, her husband, was an early proponent of the modernist aesthetic style. Woolf’s relationship to art was almost one of competition—she admired and simultaneously struggled with what these innovations in the art world meant to her as a literary artist. I

don't know that Woolf would have labeled her writing as impressionistic—but she had a hypothesis about narrative form that she continually tested and applied in her writing that we now call literary impressionism.

Impressionism

French Impressionism developed chiefly in France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, first in painting and later in music—the most famous impressionist musician was Debussy. Edouard Manet's work bridged the gap between the realism of Gustave Courbet to Impressionism by choosing contemporary subjects and in defining painting as the arrangement of paint areas on a canvas over and above its function as representation. His first exhibit of 1863 *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* ("Luncheon on the Grass") in 1863 brought him hostile criticism from the Academy, but unbridled enthusiasm from the young painters who would later be known as the Impressionists.

The term "Impressionism" for this kind of painting was first used, sarcastically, by art critic Louis Leroy in a magazine entitled *Charivari* after seeing Monet's "Impression: Sunrise." The body of Impressionist painting is comprised of works created over a period of twenty years, between about 1867 and 1886, by a small group of artists who apparently shared a set of related methods. The feature of Impressionist painting that struck most contemporary viewers was the artists' attempts to truthfully and, as much as possible, objectively document the "real world" in view of the shifting effects of light and the effects of that light on color. The Impressionist painters most well known to us are

Pierre Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro, and Frédéric Bazille.

Post Impressionism

Post-impressionism developed as an extension of Impressionism as well as a rejection of the limitations that seemed inherent in the style. The term “Post-Impressionism” was first used by Roger Fry, British art critic, for the works Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as others. Each of these artists had abandoned the earlier forms of Impressionism in order to create a more personal approach. While Impressionism was based on the objective documenting of nature in terms of effects of color and light, the work of the Post-Impressionists reflected a rejection of what they saw as a limited aim. The post-impressionists generally experimented with bolder methods of expression, while at the same time admitting what they owed to the pure, vivid colors of Impressionism, its push towards a freedom from traditional, Academy-approved subject matter, and the method of articulating form by using short brushstrokes of color. While their works were well known, and criticized, in France, London was not so well acquainted, that is until Roger Fry brought them together, first in 1910 and later in 1912.

The Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910, London

In an essay entitled “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf wrote that “on or about December, 1910, human character changed” (96). The first Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London created quite an upheaval in all areas of the art and literary world.

It and the painters exhibited there were reviled, praised, and everything in between. J. B. Bullen edited a volume that has preserved some of the first hand reactions to the artists that exhibited there, such as Cezanne, Seurat, van Gogh, and Gauguin. Some of the reactions to the paintings were not very flattering. George Moore, one of the critics, said that Cezanne and Van Gogh's works represented "the anarchy of painting. . . art in delirium' and he referred to paintings of 'crazy cornfields peopled with violent reapers, reapers from Bedlam'" (Bullen 4). In an eye-witness account by Frank Rutter, we learn that

'Every day people flock to the galleries and most of them give vent to their feelings in language more audible than polite. Angry old gentlemen shake their fists in their impotence and cry aloud that all this is just done for advertisement. . . . Scandalised ladies murmur their disgust and wonder how anybody dared to exhibit such disgraceful daubs. . . . Fashionably dressed young men pry closely into the cavases in the hope of discovering some immorality to explain the uproar, and find nothing there so shocking as their own prurient imagination. (Bullen 14)

The post-impressionists, in general, were considered "an anarchist group bound in an unholy alliance and bent upon the destruction of the civilized values of the west" (Bullen 14). One critic, Robert Ross, was most disturbed by the "apparent subversion of reason, sanity and decorum in the painting. [He judged Van Gogh's art to be] the 'visualised ravings of an adult maniac' [and said that Matisse's work was full of] discordant

colouring” and went even further, stating that the pictures at the gallery should be destroyed (Bullen 14).

Woolf and her friends attended the exhibit—in a letter to Violet Dickinson, dated November 27, 1910, she writes

I suppose you have been going everywhere—to the Grafton Galleries, and the Bernard Shaw play. Now that Clive is in the van of aesthetic opinion, I hear a great deal about pictures. I don’t think them so good as books. But why all the Duchesses are insulted by the post-impressionists, a modest sample set of painters, innocent even of indecency, I can’t conceive.

However, one mustn’t say that they are like other pictures, only better, because that makes everyone angry. (Letters I, 440)

However, in a letter from 1912, again to Violet Dickinson, Woolf writes in response to the ending of the 2nd Post-Impressionist exhibit: “The Grafton, thank God, is over; artists are an abominable race. The furious excitement of those people over their pieces of canvas coloured green and blue, is odious” (Letters II—Dec. 24, 1912).

In his introductory remarks to the Catalogue for the 1910 exhibit, Desmond McCarthy, the secretary of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition, lays out the primary features of Post-Impressionism—its relations to Impressionism, as well as the ways in which it departed from it. Both styles, he writes, reflect the “resolve of each artist to express his own temperament, and never to permit contemporary ideals to dictate to him what was beautiful, significant, and worthy to be painted” (95). However, says

McCarthy, whereas the Impressionists main interest was in “analyzing the play of light and shadow into a multiplicity of distinct colors,” what is new in the Post-Impressionists is a more “scientific interest in the representation of color,” and in “the method of representing the vibration of light by painting objects in dots and squares” (95). Whereas the Impressionists created interesting pictures of the things they painted, the Post-Impressionists, through this more abstract method, wanted to get under the surface of the things, to convey somehow the “emotional significance which lies in things, and is the most important subject matter of art” (96).

We find one of Woolf’s more measured reaction to the Post-Impressionists in the biography of Roger Fry. In it, she quotes Fry [from his introduction to the French exhibit of 1912] as saying that these artists had created a new way of seeing, that they wanted to “‘express by pictorial and plastic form certain spiritual experiences. . . .to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality’ ” (177). Woolf’s writing seems to have been most influenced by what Fry describes as the discovery of “an equivalent of life. . . .that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities” (178). Most significantly, Fry claims that these artists “aim not at illusion but at reality” (177).

Literary Impressionism

Any comparison between different arts is always a complex operation. To use the terminologies of one art to apply to the methods of another can create confusion instead of clarity. As one of E. M. Forster's characters in *Howards End* says of comparing painting to music, ". . . it's all rubbish, radically false. If Monet's really Debussy, and Debussy's really Monet, neither gentleman is worth his salt—that's my opinion" (40). The extent to which one art influences and shapes another, then, must be carefully explained. I'd like to start with one of the most often cited experts on Literary Impressionism, Marie Kronegger.

She argues that "Light is the soul of impressionist paintings, and the soul of impressionist literature." When we apply this description specifically to Woolf's fiction, we find many examples from her earliest writing to her last novel. For instance, the play of light becomes the focus in *To the Lighthouse*, and provides the reader, in the interludes between the chapters in *The Waves*, with a sense of time passing. As Kronegger points out, "In Impressionist literature. . . there is a new manner of feeling and taking part in the life of things, since existence is a going out toward primitive experience, which is fragmented into its sensational instants, and a return toward the interior of the self" (58). In other words, one of the features of literary impressionism is that it sheds considerable light on the interior life of the characters, leaving the external descriptions to unfold through their eyes. In Woolf's fiction, the characters' inner lives create the landscape.

Another essential feature of literary impressionism is its emphasis on time, both time passing and the duration of moments in time. One of the more innovative effects of an impressionist painting is to evoke in its viewers these twin sensations, thus achieving a sort of narrative element. As we view an Impressionist painting, we are both outside of its time-frame and participants in it. Art itself is "conceived as the countervailing power to the temporality of human existence . . . {and} time and death are its frames of reference" (Iser 31). This effect of time seeming to stand still and also move forward is characteristic of Woolf's narrative style. *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, is divided into three parts. In the middle section, entitled "Time Passes," the narrator portrays the house as it changes from year to year in the absence of the family. The reader gets the feeling that this time is almost eternal in its essence—it pervades everything, just like the light falls on every object in the rooms of the empty house. Kronegger claims that "all impressionist works. . . give time the character of space, to impose spatial relations on time, to do away with a chronological narrative and replace it with sketches as used in journals, notebooks, and memoirs" (58). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf replaces the conventional chronological organization of the plot with an associative structure that contains all of the characters in a kind of web. The effect is somewhat like looking at a Seurat painting up close and seeing only dots of color, and then stepping back to see the scene in its entirety. "Impressionist prose," Kronegger explains, "seems to be an exercise in discontinuity. The traditional stable world is dissolved into the unfinished, the fragmentary. . . . Impressionist writers have found a way to write prose which is not bounded by a beginning and an end" (52). This boundlessness characterizes Woolf's fiction.

Woolf's Short Fiction

Woolf's short fiction, much of which was written after of the 1910 Post Impressionist Exhibition, reflects the impact that this exhibition, as well as her relationships with Vanessa Bell and Roger Fry, had on her writing. In her journals, letters, and short essays, we can detect her need for "a new language" for her stories. In an essay entitled "Modern Fiction," Woolf says that life should not be portrayed the way it has always been, as a solid material reality, but that it should be portrayed as it was actually lived—real life, she said is lived under the surface of things, and that it is this that the writer should be concerned with and try to express. Woolf claims that novelists were spending far too much time on the surface and ignoring what, to her, really mattered. She wonders if, having read such fiction as was popular at the time, particularly Arnold Bennett's work, "Is it worth while? What is the point of it all?" She proposes that in this kind of fiction, "Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else if worth while" (153). In this essay we find the best definition of her style of literary impressionism:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there. . . .Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent

envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. .
. .Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which
they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in
appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.
(154-155)

In “Kew Gardens,” and “The Mark on the Wall,” we can see the influence of both Impressionism and Post Impressionism. “Kew Gardens” was published in a collection of short fiction entitled *Monday or Tuesday* in 1921. In this piece, she makes an early attempt at the impressionistic style which would figure so largely in her novels. Woolf takes us on a walk through the gardens, but not as one of the walkers; it’s almost as if we are among the flowers looking up. Jack Stewart points out that in this short piece, she “focuses primarily on transforming effects of light and distance, but also zeroes in on objects with hallucinating vividness of detail” (243).

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. . . . The light fell either upon the smooth, grey back of a pebble, or, the shell of a snail with its brown, circular veins, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear. Instead,

the drop was left in a second silver grey once more, and the light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves.

Stewart claims that this early story is a crystallization of Woolf's Impressionist style: "people are etherealized or dehumanized by the play of light through a shifting lens, alternately microscopic or blurred, that synthesizes human and natural objects" (242). As we know, the play of light on water, on objects, is one of the hallmarks of impressionism; as Stewart puts it, in impressionism "light is life, and objects, liberated from the cramp of mind, vibrate on the retina" (242).

Woolf experiments with this impressionist style yet again in a story entitled "The Mark on the Wall." The narrator of this short piece sees a mark on her wall as she sits smoking and begins to meditate on it: within this meditation, impressions flow swiftly. She contemplates the meaning of life: ". . .if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down the shoot in the post office! . . .all so casual, all so haphazard. . ." . She further contemplates what is "after life: The slow pulling down of thick green stalks so that the cup of the flower, as it turns over, deluges one with purple and red light. . .There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up,

perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour. . .”. Such passages indicate Woolf’s developing impressionist method, of her need as a writer to create the shifting, vivid life as it is lived—the thoughts as they change from one subject to another, the connections between our minds, the subterranean life of which we remain largely unaware.

Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse and The Waves

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, we have the first novel length treatment of a subject from an entirely Impressionist/Post Impressionist view. The style of *Mrs. Dalloway*, written in 1925, builds on a literary style that Woolf had been developing throughout her writing career. Woolf describes this style as “tunneling” into the subjective experiences of her characters. In her many essays, letters, and diary entries, and in early stories and novels, she had been building a philosophy of the modern novel, which she would then practice in her own fiction. The inner life of her characters, which she had said was the modern novelist’s new territory, is explored in great depth in this novel. From the first page, we are swept along by Clarissa Dalloway’s impressions of this day in June. Woolf also opens up the thoughts of other characters, but Clarissa’s is the primary point of view.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. . . . For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? Over twenty,—one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a

suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; . . . In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (4)

Woolf represents Clarissa's thoughts as associative connections that move rapidly, sort of hovering around her joy in the day: the swirl of images, the staccato-like style of the sentences. Woolf recreates what she perceives as the mind's gathering in of impressions. Throughout the novel, Clarissa wonders about the meaning of her life—these bits and pieces that come to her through her memories, through conversations with people on the street, in her home.

As Mrs. Dalloway makes her way through the streets of London, she comes to Bond Street to do some shopping. Here, Clarissa is once again struck by the sounds and the colors of her surroundings, particularly the flowers:

. . . opening her eyes, how fresh like frilled linen clean from a laundry laid in wicker trays the roses looked; and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale—as if it were the evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer’s day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations, its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds; and how she loved the grey-white moths spinning in and out, over the cherry pie, over the evening primroses! (13)

The impressionistic technique, that rush of images, here focuses on the vivid life of the flowers, the way their colors seem to vibrate; they burn and spin. The goal for Woolf, again, is to get beyond the surface of things and through this kind of luxurious description, get at what she called “life itself.” Meaning resides not outside or inside, but in that interaction between the two.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf pushed her impressionist style even further to reveal the inner self, to illumine our understanding of the mind through the moment. She felt that language was inadequate to the task of expressing the transcendent moment and was drawn to painting because of its ability to express that moment without the burden of words. As I alluded to in the introductory remarks, her sister, Vanessa Bell, was a painter, and she and Virginia often compared notes concerning their respective arts. In an

essay in which she discusses the work of artist Walter Sickert, she claims that words "are an impure medium; better far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint" (192). Furthermore, she acknowledges that there is an unmistakable, undeniable mixture of the two arts, that "though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common" (198). Woolf's wanted to discover a way to communicate in her writing that essence of human experience which she perceived to be incommunicable through words. In *To the Lighthouse* we see this dilemma worked out primarily through the character of Lily Briscoe.

Lily struggles to create for herself a sense of meaning. The inner thoughts of the characters represent their attempts to achieve the "right" words to capture and understand experience, just as a painter might, using a brush to shadow here, to lighten there ("Pictures" 176). In this novel, Woolf seems to have found a way to express in words "the thing itself" that her sister seemed to have found in her painting. By using light, color, and shadow, the tools of a painter, Woolf recreates the attitudes and actions, the thoughts and the desires of her characters. It seems that Woolf was forever to compete with her sister, drawing from her both the inspiration and the energy, derived perhaps in part from envy, that propelled her forward in her experimentation with language. In her fiction, Woolf gives voice to her search for a language that could indeed compete with, and perhaps surpass, the language of painting in its ability to cut through to the essence of experience.

Lily's painting contains the silence of a moment, not captured except in her mind until the end of the novel, where the reader must "see" it in her own mind, giving to the

painter's vision his or her own shape and meaning. In this respect, Lily's vision, except the bits Woolf relates to the reader, remains a private one. Art in Lily's case, is a means of self-expression, but a silent one, a place, according to Howard Nemerov, that "Both poet and painter want to reach" (9). Within that silence is a space for reflection and the creative imagination of the reader. It is in the silence that the power of art can transcend time and ego. The reader has no words to convey this vision, except as we reinterpret Woolf's descriptions. In this kind of style, Edward Bishop argues, language "is no longer to be used to create and communicate order but to bring one face to face with that region behind language where 'all is darkness and conjecture' "(114). Relative, rather than absolute, knowledge is the realm in which the artist/writer works.

According to Walter Pater, an early influence in Woolf's life, "To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions" (15). Artistic expression, then, becomes a vehicle through which to reconcile the contradiction between the objective world and subjective perception. Woolf's vision of the world certainly owes much to Pater's philosophies of aesthetics, as she privileged the moment in her fiction. This moment, which slices through linear temporality, is irreducible through language. The work of the artist is to express these moments. Woolf's painterly vision expands to include not one moment, but many, against a background of the natural landscape in flux. In his "Conclusion" to his work entitled *The Renaissance*, we find Pater's most vivid description of this kind of perception, which Woolf seems to be trying to recreate:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But . . . if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, . . .the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.

According to John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury, Woolf's concept owes much to Pater's view of consciousness "as itself aesthetic. . .as a kind of poeticized, subjective vision (408). Woolf, like Pater expressed the idea that "we all. . .live {in} an unconditioned state of high reverie and awareness analogous to the condition of the artist" (408). In her work, Woolf offers us a window that opens onto a timeless view of nature, framed as if it were an Impressionist painting.

The Impressionist method in *To the Lighthouse* is demonstrated in part by the fact that we see objects in the narrative bathed in various shades of color and light according to the time of day of the particular scene: in the morning and early afternoon, the colors

are bright. In the late afternoon and evenings, the colors are muted, and then almost fade altogether. Shadows appear at different spots during the progress of the day. These scenes are almost entirely pure vision. The only sounds are the waves as they crash on the shore and the birds which occasionally sing. Woolf is not concerned with exactness of vision, but with the impression the scene makes on her mind. Woolf seems to have in mind here the advice of Monet, who once said that when "you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have in front of you, a tree, a field. . . .Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape, until it gives your own naive impression of the scene" (Dunstan 46). The life and movement of a scene was the most important thing, not the details of a traditionally perceived reality. In describing the Impressionists method, H. H. Arnason explains that "This is the world as we actually see it: not a fixed, absolute perspective illusion in the eye of a frozen spectator with the limited frame of the picture window, but a thousand different glimpses of a constantly changing scene caught by a constantly moving eye" (Arnason 23). In this movement of light, color, and shadow lies the innovation of Impressionist painting, as well as in literary impressionism. In both, the lines of reality blur, and the perception is one that allows their audience room in which to create meaning out of the silence of the vision. The silence behind language in Woolf's novel is simultaneously the silence of nature and the silence of the self. Time is past, but it is preserved in this art, much the same way that the past is preserved in a painting.

In this novel, painting and creating order occupy the same level of significance; they seem to be one and the same act. The creation and maintenance of order, in the presence and under threat of chaos and dissolution, were of essential importance to Woolf. As Lily says, " 'But this is what I see; this is what I see,' and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her" (19). Under the gaze of the critical Charles Tansley, her vision as realized seems to her "infinitely bad!" However, Lily also regards her work to be of importance, if to no one else, to herself. She has the power to create out of meaningless "mounds of blue and green which seemed to her like clods with no life in them now" vibrance and life and meaning. ". . .she vowed, she would inspire them, force them to move, flow, do her bidding tomorrow" (49). As she struggles to keep hold of her vision, she subdues "all her impressions as a woman to something more general; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children--her picture" (53). This vision was always uppermost in her mind, even while at dinner she is thinking of her picture: ". . .There's the sprig on the table-cloth; there's my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters--nothing else" (86). Lily is completely absorbed in her work, as her subject, Mrs. Ramsay, is absorbed with her son, James. Painting appears to be a metaphor for procreation, for continuance, for strength, and for the idea of vision (as the novel and the painting are representations of that vision). Furthermore, painting stands for the representation of the moment or "the thing itself." The question for Lily, as for Woolf, was "Where to begin? . . .One line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple

became in practice immediately complex. . . .Still the risk must be run; the mark made" (157).

In Woolf's description of the scene in which Lily begins once more the landscape she started ten years earlier almost like a dance we see movement and quickness:

The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it--a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; . . .she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. (158-159)

In this "quick study," both spontaneous and original, Lily's method calls to mind the *esquisse*, a method which actually dates back to the early 19th century in the Academy tradition. In this method, "masses of light, shade and colour were laid down to create the design which embodied the artist's first inspired idea for the final painting. Careful finish was not expected for this sketch, in which--on the contrary--spontaneity and originality were the prime qualities sought" (Callen 15). What the Impressionists and their predecessors did was to make the style of the *esquisse* the style of the final draft. In other words, the goal of the Impressionist painter was not to have a "finished" painting, but one

that retained, as much as possible, the qualities of spontaneity and originality. More specifically, according to Callen, the Impressionists retained the individual study known as the *etude* as the finished painting (58). As a matter of fact, in order to "render their sensations, the Impressionists looked to the techniques used in earlier landscape studies, and in the freely handled compositional *esquisses* common to all art students' training" (Callen 65). By this method, the Impressionists were able to maintain a sense of the spontaneous nature of their experiences, and allow the vision itself to dictate the outcome of the painting. Woolf's emphasis on the moment as revealed by one mind reflects the emphasis on the quick study of the impressionists.

Lily realized that although phrases and visions would come to her, that the thing she was really after was that "thing itself before it has been made anything" (193). Like Woolf, Lily was continually frustrated at the inadequacy of art to capture that thing itself: "It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on" (193). Walter Sickert once said, "On a series of apparently tiresome, flat sittings seeming to lead nowhere--one day something happens, the touches seem to 'take,' the deaf canvas listens, your words flow and you have done something" (Dunstan 153). It is interesting that Sickert, a painter and acquaintance of Woolf's relies on a comparison to writing when talking about the process of painting. When Lily's picture is finally completed, she acknowledges that she has had her vision. In the finished painting, Mrs. Ramsay and James have been captured in a moment, unaware of being painted. Lily considers what this could mean towards the end of the novel:

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. . . Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent. . . this was the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape. [find the page number!]

The link between Lily and her subjects is both physical and metaphysical--the now dead Mrs. Ramsay was the figure who completed her painting, as Mrs. Ramsay's vision "completed" Lily's life. Painting is the central creative activity in *To the Lighthouse*. The novel seems to be a study in light, shadow and color. Many of the descriptive passages call to our minds the Impressionist landscapes of Monet, Manet, or Cezanne. In this manner, the metaphor of painting is embedded within the linguistic and narrative structure of the text.

Impressionist painting, as well as writing, is not concerned with the "moment of Truth," but with the moment of "confluence," or "any moment where the relationship between experience and time-sequence is haphazard; it is the moment of. . . pure existence" (Scott 222). All impressionist style paintings then are "on the brink of a-- rather than the--next moment. . . , thoroughly contiguous to an adjacent space" (222). In the Impressionists paintings, the "made is the being made and unmade" (223). In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily states that her vision must be perpetually remade. In an Impressionist painting, light "scintillates across the scene without bias, clings to any obstacle; all things are equal in the light that embellishes them" (223). Because the reflection of light is the

primary trope of Impressionism, the focus of this art is primarily ocular. The use of light in an Impressionist painting gives it a materiality. Reflection, refraction and the play of light are central metaphors. The light of the sun touches and changes the objects within its reach equally. In this effusion of light, Woolf creates a vision that borders on the surreal. Woolf pictures inner reality through nature; through nature, Woolf transforms the inner world. As Walter Pater wrote,

The essence of all artistic beauty is expression. . .the line, the colour, the word, following obediently, and with minute scruple, the conscious motions of a convinced intelligible soul. To make men interested in themselves. . . to flash light into the house within, its many chambers, its memories and associations, upon its inscribed and pictured walls. (Iser 25)

Woolf's use of vivid colors and the play of light create the effect of a painting, to the extent that we recognize in the scene something of ourselves. She consistently alludes to the metaphor of art in the implicit substitution of words for pictures; nature is foregrounded in such a way that we see past the words into the images. Art gives density to experience and enables us to forget the destructiveness of time. The painter, or maker of images, escapes the burden of words which weighs down the writer; "art seizes these {fleeting} impressions and transplants them into a new context of heightened life" (Iser 31). By the end of the novel, Lily has achieved her vision and feels satisfied. Mrs. Ramsey will not fade.

To the Lighthouse contains more than description in that its narrative style is akin to the impressionist method of painting. The gradual laying on of detail, from the first chapter to the last, the way in which Woolf delineates character through impressions rather than through a "realistic" description, the way she pulls color out of each scene, juxtaposing the lights and the darks, the way she subdues her color with shade and shadow. Woolf paints a picture in *To the Lighthouse*, represented by the attempt Lily makes to achieve her vision. As a word-painter, Woolf chose her colors carefully, bearing in mind always, just as Lily does, her vision. The colors that occur most often in her palette are the primary colors, juxtaposed with the less frequently used colors which are mixtures and are therefore more muted. Contrasting color is another hallmark of the impressionist style. Furthermore, in the later Impressionists, known as the Fauve painters (i. e. Matisse), the juxtaposition of colors occurs within one image so that the eye must vacillate between the colors in order to perceive the whole; thus, the colors come to life. Woolf skillfully creates images that convey her vision with the greatest vibrance and luminosity. In the way that she records what she sees, creating a heightened sense of personal perception, Woolf's methods are impressionistic.

The Waves

In wanting to get beyond language to a place of pure image, Woolf experiments with color, light, shadow and vibration more completely in *The Waves* than in any of her other novels. As Bernard, one of the six characters in the novel, says, "Painters live lives of methodical absorption, adding stroke to stroke. They are not like poets--scapegoats; they are not chained to the rock. Hence the silence, the sublimity" (157). It is sublime

not to be dependent on words, and yet she is as a writer. Woolf's wish to combine the beauties of painting and writing in this novel is testament to her devotion to art itself, and her faith that art will succeed in bringing some sort of order to her existence. If not in competition with Vanessa, Virginia was certainly eager to push her own craft to its limits in order to create new worlds of experience. In *To the Lighthouse*, having had her vision, Lily is tired, but we assume satisfied with her achievement. At the end of *The Waves*, Bernard's completed vision energizes him, sets him free from himself and enables him to find renewed life. This, in my view, is the end to which Woolf started in *To the Lighthouse*. Bernard's vision at the end of the novel fully integrates him with his experience, and returns him not only to himself, but to the landscape of which he is a part. As John Richetti states, ". . .the 'characters' in *The Waves* are not fully separate" but that "each voice is both a fragment and a microcosmic composite of its world, seen in a momentary light, from a particular perspective, in a transitory mood" (810). *The Waves* is a "mosaic" (29, 247) of light and shadow, of thousands of colors. Like an Impressionist painting, in which, as Callen tells us the painters used "mosaic-like touches of colour"(65), Woolf creates a vivid series of images in which the characters compose a flower, "to which every eye brings its own contribution" (127). They forge a "ring of steel", a "ring of light," a pattern and a structure (135, 116). Like an Impressionist painting, *The Waves* gives us silence, color, light and shadow, a series of images in which the details are left deliberately blurred and where the colors, like the characters, flow together in a visionary triumph. This "idea of the visual world presenting itself to the eye in coloured patches of light, or *sensations*, . . .was central to the Impressionists' method" (Callen 66). This method removes us from the traditional sense of time and suspends us

for a moment in the joy of the experience. As Walter Pater noted art "removes the 'end' from life. . . , and by dispensing with all teleology it not only relieves the burden of finiteness, but also liberates those elements of life that would otherwise be only 'means' to the end" (Iser 35).

Woolf successfully achieves in *The Waves* the freedom from the "means to the end," with Bernard's rebirth. Walter Pater, in his "Conclusion" to the *Renaissance*, states that "It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off--that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (219). In *The Waves*, Woolf is able to weave together not a traditional plot, but, like an Impressionist painting "'visual sensations'". Like an artist, Woolf portrays to her readers a "myriad array of coloured patches directly", with seemingly no intervention (Callen 67). It is only after we read the entire novel and stand back, as it were, from the canvas, that we can see the images coalesce into a series of coherent images. The silence of their contemplation takes us out of the world of complex language and into a world of sheer vision. If, as Baudelaire thought, the very heart of life consists of vibration, it is this vibration with which Woolf ends *The Waves*, the "pervasive vibration of molecules and light" in a kingdom of silent wonder.

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